

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 18 Issue 2

February 2009

February FIG Meeting: *Sunday, Feb. 22, 7:00 PM  
at the Vernon Manor*

## Evolution Since Darwin:

### A Beagle's Eye View Of The Galapagos Finches.

By Ken Petren, Department of Biology, University of Cincinnati

The talk begins at a key point in the history of evolutionary thought and continues to show how the early research ideas are still being pursued today. Darwin's visit to the Galápagos aboard the Beagle in 1835 was brief, but it was a key influence in the development of his "dangerous" idea of descent with modification. Thanks to the advent of modern DNA analysis techniques, the specimens collected by Darwin are revealing new information about the evolutionary history of Darwin's finches. The genetic variation found in these specimens are affecting current thinking about evolutionary processes and they foretell a dim future for biodiversity in the Galápagos islands.

Ken Petren is an evolutionary ecologist and Associate Professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Cincinnati. His research has concentrated on the use of island biota as natural experiments. This thinking has brought him to Hawaii to study invasive gecko lizards, to the Sea of Cortes to pursue chuckwalla lizards, and most recently to the Galápagos to unravel the evolutionary history of Darwin's finches.

March FIG Meeting: *Sunday, 22 March 2009 at  
the Museum Center*

Time and meeting to be discussed.

FIG will take a field trip to the Cincinnati Museum Center to view the *RACE: Are We Really So Different* Exhibit. Curated by the American Anthropological Exhibit, the show explores the social construction of race and how race has played a role in historical interactions. Current science tells us all humans share a common ancestry and the differences we see among people are natural variations, the results of migration, marriage and adaptation to different environments. How does this fit with the idea of race? Looking through the eyes of history, science and lived experience, the *RACE Project* explains differences among people and reveals the reality - and unreality - of race. The story of race is complex and may challenge how we think about race and human variation, about the differences and similarities among people.

## Inside

## Page

England's Noblest & Her Greatest by Robert Green Ingersol .....	2
Poem: <i>Inauguration</i> by Edwin Kagin .....	2
Science Book Club.....	3
Things to do, Things to see .....	3
Survival of the Finches by Wendy Beckham.....	4
In the News .....	5
<i>Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America</i> by Steven Waldman Book Review by Wolf Roder.....	7

## Michael Shermer to speak at Ohio State University

Author and founder of the Skeptic Society, Michael Shermer, will present "*Why People Believe Weird Things*" at the Ohio State University campus on Thursday, February 19. This event is being sponsored by the Students For Freethought of OSU. Time and place will be announced by Friday, February 13. They are currently seeking a larger venue than the one they have reserved. Please check their website, [www.sffosu.org](http://www.sffosu.org) for more information.

Mr. Shermer is an excellent speaker and this is a fascinating subject from his book of the same title.

## Events----(Note Date Changes)

### February Meeting

Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2009, 7:00 PM at  
the Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH

### March Meeting

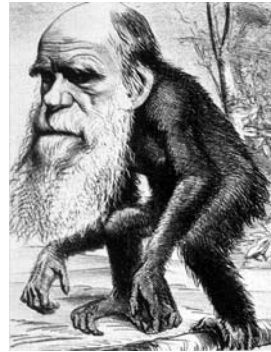
Sunday, Mar. 22, 2009, 7:00 PM  
at the Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH



## England's Noblest and Her Greatest

by Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-1899)

This century will be called Darwin's century. He was one of the greatest men who ever touched this globe. He has explained more of the phenomena of life than all of the religious teachers. Write the name of Charles Darwin on the one hand and the name of every theologian who ever lived on the other, and from that name has come more light to the world than from all of those. His doctrine of evolution, his doctrine of the survival of the fittest, his doctrine of the origin of species, has removed in every thinking mind the last vestige of orthodox Christianity. He has not only stated, but has demonstrated, that the inspired writer knew nothing of this world, nothing of the origin of man, nothing of geology, nothing of astronomy, nothing of nature; that the Bible is a book written by ignorance at the instigation of fear. Think of the men who replied to him. Only a few years ago there was no person too ignorant to successfully answer Charles Darwin; and the more ignorant he was the more cheerfully he undertook the task. He was held up to ridicule, the scorn and contempt of the Christian world, and yet when he died, England was proud to put his dust with that of her noblest and her grandest. Darwin conquered the intellectual world, and his doctrines are now accepted facts.



**FIG Leaves** - Thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons are very welcome. Submit in Electronic format via the internet to:

fignotes at(@) gofigger.org; or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 53174, Cincinnati, OH 45253. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

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### Memberships run from:

1 January to 31 December.  
 One year: \$25  
 Family: \$35  
 If you join during the year, you receive a \$2 discount for each month that has passed.  
 We request contributions above membership dues. Contributions are tax deductible.

### Inauguration

by Edwin Kagin  
 20 January 2009

We had seen sights, but this mocked our imaginations.  
 We had used words, but this defied our metaphors.  
 We had once been, our heritage proclaimed,  
 "One Nation Indivisible," and "Out of Many, One,"  
 Until smallness of soul began to smother dreams.  
 Then, suddenly, sorely profaned, and wounded, soon to die  
 Our nation did an unimagined thing.  
 We rolled away the stone.  
 We shook the heels of history upon retreating wrongs.  
 We watched as hope, long dormant, bloomed,  
 And, through eyes blurred with tears,  
 We went outside and raised the flag.



Edwin Kagin, National Legal Director, American Atheists

### Quote

Name something you like. I bet it's not in heaven. Sex? Sorry, lust is a sin. Can't have it. Your career? Nope. There's no money in heaven; nobody needs to work. Besides, as far as I can tell from studying the scriptures, all you do in heaven is pretty much just sit around all day and praise the Lord. I don't know about you, but I think that after the first oh, I don't know, 50,000,000 years of that I'd start to get a little bored. - Rick Reynolds

### Unquote



## THINGS TO DO....

## THINGS TO SEE...



### The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

**When:** Monday, Feb 16 at 7:00PM - 10:00 PM

**Where:** Joseph-Beth Booksellers  
2692 Madison Rd. Rookwood Pavillion  
Cincinnati OH 45207; 513-396-8966

#### Meetup Description

Regular monthly gatherings are held on the 3rd Mondays from 7:00 - 10:00 PM. New people join every month, and we all wear name tags (no quizzes). Check the Message Board for current hot topics.

To find us: Go in the front doors of the bookstore and turn left. Enter the Bistro and walk straight back as far as you can go. We're all freethinkers, so we'll look just like you.

The Bistro has a full menu, including vegetarian options. If you like, enjoy dinner, dessert, tea, or a brewski. Restaurant direct line: 513-396-8970

The Bookstore / Bistro is not associated with this meetup group, and will not be able to answer questions. Do please use our Message Board feature to connect with fellow group members.

To contact us:

[http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/9182020/?a=cv1c\\_grp](http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/9182020/?a=cv1c_grp)

### Hear! Hear! *Answers in Atheism* at

<[www.answersinatheism.net](http://www.answersinatheism.net)>

**JOIN US!** - We are live on the internet Thursday evenings from 7 pm to 8 pm EST. Our shows are also available as archived audio files, so you can listen later at any time. Please tune in at [www.answersinatheism.net](http://www.answersinatheism.net).

The Answers in Atheism crew

### Media Events/Programs

#### The Humanist Perspective

Show times on Time-Warner Cable:

Channel 15: Tuesday 3:30 am and Saturday 7:30 pm

Channel 24: Friday 12:30 pm.

#### Programs:

**10-13 Feb:** *Naturalism through Narrative*, Part 4, with Judy Walker.

**17-20 Feb:** *Naturalism through Narrative*, Part 5, with Judy Walker.

**24-27 Feb:** *The God Theory is Dead*, Part 1, with John Shook.

**3-6 March:** *The God Theory is Dead*, Part 2, with John Shook.

#### Quote:

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change." Charles Darwin 1809-1882

#### Unquote:

**2009 SCIENCE BOOK CLUB Schedule** - All meetings will be on the 3rd Sunday every month at the downtown Cincinnati Public Library except June 21 (Father's Day). Room 3A at 2:30 pm.

**Jan 18** - *The Feeling of What Happens-Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* by Damasio, Antonio

**Feb 15** - *Emotions Revealed, Second Edition: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life* by Paul Ekman

**March 15** - *The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives* by Leonard Mlodinow

**April 19 - in Room 3B** *Alex & Me: How a Scientist and a Parrot Discovered a Hidden World of Animal Intelligence--and Formed a Deep Bond in the Process* by Irene Pepperberg

**May 17 -in Room 3B** *The Unnatural History of the Sea* by Callum Roberts

**June 14 -in Room 3B** or 28 - *Commonsense Rebellion: Taking Back Your Life from Drugs, Shrinks, Corporations, and a World Gone Crazy* by Bruce E. Levine

**July 19** - *Why Science* by James S. Trefil

**Aug 16** - *Death by Black Hole : and Other Cosmic Quandaries* by Neil deGrasse Tyson

**Sept 20** - one of a number of books on complexity theory and applications

**Oct. 18** - *Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries?: Discourses on Godel, Magic Hexagrams, Little Red Riding Hood, and Other Mathematical and Pseudoscientific Topics* by Martin Gardner

**Nov 15** - book not yet selected

**Dec 20** - one of a number of books on the relation/conflict between science and religion





## Survival of the Finches

By Wendy Beckman

Ken Petren's research is for the birds. And the lizards. But his genetic studies of Charles Darwin's famed Galápagos finches, not to mention the rowdy social life of South Pacific geckos, are pretty serious stuff. His research has direct ties to what once was arguably one of the most controversial scientific theories that ever shook up the nonscientific world's comfortable view of itself. And he could also help us better manage the environment and guarantee the future of the popular darling (at least in TV animation)--of the lizard line.



Ken Petren

An associate professor of biological sciences, Petren is using UC's latest analytical technology to confirm and extend what Darwin observed in 1835 during his visit to the Galápagos Islands, and later developed in his seminal work *On the Origin of Species*. Petren is also studying the spread (colonization) of geckos--that's the nocturnal house variety as opposed to a green, day gecko (the Cockney-accented one currently peddling insurance on TV)--in the hope of improving their conservation and management.

The Galápagos archipelago, off the coast of Ecuador, comprises 13 major islands, six smaller islands, and dozens of islets and rocks spread over 23,000 square miles of the eastern Pacific Ocean. A century after Darwin's sojourn there, the Ecuadorian government recognized the fragility of this environment and set aside 90 percent of the then-uninhabited area as a national park. They were just in time. Tourism to the Galápagos exploded in the 1960s. Small wonder, when tour guides tout constantly sunny skies, relaxing sea breezes, turquoise-blue ocean and sandy beaches of "crystal white, pink, volcanic black and looking-glass green." But with recent increases in both population and tourism, the island species are not as isolated as they once were. This potentially damaging interaction, however, gives researchers another area in which to examine invasive and native species interactions.

Scientists have spent decades seeking evidence to support Darwin's theory that the Galápagos finches evolved from one species common to the Pacific coast of South America. Within the islands, the finches have adapted to their habitat, especially to different sources of food. This evolutionary accommodation is reflected in the size and structure of the birds' bills. For example, vegetarian finches and ground finches have beaks best suited for crushing. Warbler,

cactus and woodpecker finches have long, slender bills ideal for probing insects out of crevices. The woodpecker finch even uses twigs as tools for digging out food deeper than the reach of its beak, and the vampire finch actually pecks at the tail feathers of seabirds to draw blood as a food source.

Ever since joining UC's faculty in 2000, Petren has been taking teams of faculty and students to the Galápagos Islands to study how various species thrive and evolve. He's seeking genetic clues as to how one ancestral Galápagos finch evolved into 15 different species. His research team collaborating with Princeton University Darwin finch specialists Peter and Rosemary Grant and supported by the National Science Foundation is working to reconstruct the history of populations and species. Their studies genetically compare tissue from present-day finches with samples taken from museum specimens of birds collected by Darwin himself.

Petren points out, however, that not just anyone can remove tissue samples, which can be as minuscule a slice of one toe pad, from Darwin's originals. "You have to make a very strong argument to do destructive testing like this," he says. "The tissue we take could possibly change the way we perceive and place a value on isolated populations of many other species around the globe." Petren and his team bring their samples back for genetic for analysis at the Institute for Genomic Resources, in UC's environmental health department. The team's findings so far show that similarity in finches is unrelated to the proximity of their various islands. Instead it appears to depend on similarities of habitat on their home islands, which can range across the archipelago from low and dry to high and moist. "People tend to assume most animals move and settle randomly," Petren explains. "Using the tools of molecular genetics, however, we picked up

a signature that suggests they're selecting where to settle based on habitat, and this is factoring into the formation or divergence of species."

### From Finches to Lizards

To better understand how communities of organisms form, Petren's lab also studies how house geckos hitchhiked with the original Polynesian and Melanesian islanders, and continue to spread with the help of humans across the Pacific islands.

"We use geckos as a model to understand how invasive species succeed and displace residents," Petren explains. "Humans are moving geckos around a lot. Some species are residents, having reached the islands thousands of years ago. More recently, however, other species are being introduced by accident with cargo, and sometimes people bring them in for the pet trade."

Petren says that behavior often determines whether a species can successfully colonize a new habitat and whether it spreads rapidly and affects native species. He duplicates the geckos' natural environment as best he can for the 300-plus South Pacific lizards in his lab so he can examine them as they eat, socialize and fight. Documenting visual displays like tail wags and arches, vocalizations, approaches and retreats, bite-holds, wrestles, licks and copulations--s well as throwing each other off the wall--the researchers found that social interaction between invasive and native species, not just competition for resources or aggression on the invaders' part, plays a significant role in species turnover.

"Increase in global trade and travel is slowly bringing the world's biota together," Petren says, "so we're bound to lose a great deal of biodiversity in the process. But understanding how species are displaced is the first step in understanding how the process can be managed."

- Reprinted from *UC Research*, Fall 2006



20 January 2009



## Center for Inquiry Leaders Applaud Obama's Progressive and Inclusive Vision for America

President Barack Obama in his history-making Inaugural Address today sounded the clarion call for a more inclusive and progressive America. The President's speech outlined a largely humanistic agenda, promising to "restore science to its rightful place," as we collectively face the massive challenges facing us as a country in the twenty-first century. Significantly, in affirming the pluralistic character of American society, President Obama expressly included "non-believers" among Christians, Muslims, Jews and Hindus, as part of the body politic.

"It truly is a historic and remarkable achievement of significance that the President of the United States referred to non-believers in recognition of the growing number of Americans--now numbering tens of millions--who hold no religious affiliation. As far as we are aware, this is the first time this has happened," said Paul Kurtz, chairman and founder of the Center for Inquiry. "It is also noteworthy that he called for the restoration of science to its rightful place and the application of technology to the improvement of human life. We applaud his courageous optimism in outlining an audacious program for the future," said Kurtz.

Ronald A. Lindsay, president and CEO of the Center for Inquiry, emphasized the importance of President Obama's acknowledgment. "For much of American history, agnostics and atheists were denied important civil rights, and in some states, until the early 1960's, were explicitly forbidden from holding public office. Even after these legal constraints had been removed, nonbelievers were stigmatized or ignored by most politicians. We are encouraged that President Obama has unambiguously indicated he will be the president of all Americans."

The Center for Inquiry/Transnational is a nonprofit, educational, advocacy, and scientific-research think tank based in Amherst, New York. It is home to the Council for Secular Humanism, founded in 1980, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (formerly CSICOP), founded in 1976, and the Commission for Scientific Medicine and Mental Health. Their research and educational projects focus on three broad areas: religion, ethics, and society; paranormal and fringe-science claims; and medicine and health. The Center's Web site is [www.centerforinquiry.net](http://www.centerforinquiry.net).

## Obama's Nonbeliever Nod Unsettles Some; Inauguration Remark Draws Fire

by Melinda Hennenberger,

In his inaugural address, President Barack Obama celebrated America as a "nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus -- and nonbelievers." Some Christians are taking issue with the approach to inclusiveness, saying the president misrepresented America's culture and heritage.

Not everyone was happy with President Barack Obama's nod to nonbelievers and non-Christians in his inaugural address. And some of the stiff criticism about Obama's religious inclusiveness is coming from African-American Christians who maintain that no, all faiths were actually not created equal.

"For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness," the new president said. "We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this earth," he also said. Nothing too controversial, proclaiming that America's strength lies in its diversity.

But between those two statements, the new president got specific: "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers."

By mentioning, for the first time in an inaugural address, the 16.1 percent of Americans who check "no" when asked about religion, Obama turned it into the most controversial line in his speech -- praised by *The New York Times* editorial board and cited by some Christians as evidence that he is a heretic, and in his well-spoken way, a serious threat.

With that one line, the president "seems to be trying to redefine American culture, which is distinctively Christian," said Bishop E.W. Jackson of the Exodus Faith Ministries in Chesapeake, Va. "The overwhelming majority of Americans identify as Christians, and what disturbs me is that he seems to be trying to redefine who we are."

Earlier this week, Jackson was a guest on the popular conservative Christian radio show 'Janet Parshall's America,' where a succession of callers, many of whom identified themselves as African-American, said they shared the concern, and were perplexed and put off by the President's shout-out to nonbelievers.



## Scientists Track Poverty's Links To Cognition

by: Linda Jacobson, *Education Week*, 7 January 2009

*Socioeconomic disparities affect prefrontal function in children*

The brains of children who are living in poverty function differently from those of children living in better circumstances, according to a study by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley. The research shows that the prefrontal cortex - the part of the brain that is active in problem-solving, reasoning, and creativity - responds differently in normal 9- and 10-year-olds who differ only by their socioeconomic status.

The study involved 26 children. Half of them were from poor families, and half were from high-income households. Measuring electrical activity in the brain with an electroencephalograph, the researchers found response levels were lower in the brains of the children from low-income families when they were viewing a series of pictures of triangles that were then mixed with other images, such as a puppy or Mickey Mouse. The researchers compared the brain activity at that point with that of people who have had a part of the prefrontal cortex damaged by a stroke.

"It's not just that these kids are poor and more likely to have health problems, but they might actually not be getting full brain development from the stressful and relatively impoverished environment associated with low socioeconomic status: fewer books, less reading, fewer games, fewer visits to museums," Robert Knight, the director of the university's Helen Wills Neuroscience Institute, said in a press release.

Work is under way at the university to reverse the brain differences by developing games that improve this area of brain function. The study has been accepted for publication in the August issue of the *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*.

## Alternative Medicine, Will It Be Covered By Health Care Reform?

The development of universal health programs in the Obama administration is seen as an opportunity for alternatives to get a share of the action. You can expect to see a major push to include unscientific alternatives that often have large and outspoken followings.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 06 February 2009



## Other Moons.

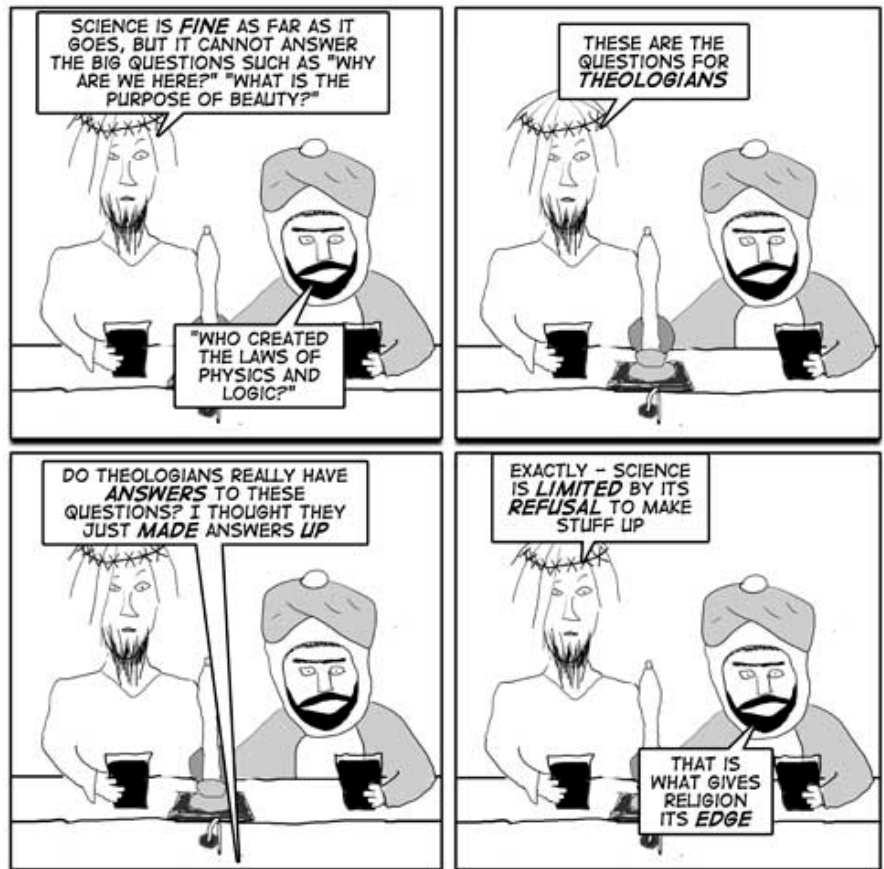
Where should we look next? *Nature* this week examined the question of where we should go next in the solar system, Europa or Titan. We don't get many major missions to the outer planets and their Moons, although 3 or 4 billion dollars no longer sounds like much. It would hardly allow a banker to redecorate his office. In an editorial, *Nature* came down slightly on the side of Titan. Hey, I'm just a subscriber, but while the lakes of Titan are nice, the search for life to which we are not related has got to be the greatest quest in science. Is there another way evolution could have done it?

*What's New* by Robert L. Park, 23 January 2009

## Rebuilding America.

"We will restore science to its rightful place." After eight years of suppression, those words from President Obama's inaugural address produced a hormone rush that lifted the spirits of every scientist. Just hours later the President warned that, "the challenges we face are real; they are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time," but there was no dampening the shear joy of scientists. The President has since been busy undoing policies from stem cells to torture.

*What's New* by Robert L. Park, 23 January 2009





*Founding Faith: Providence, Politics,  
and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America*  
by Steven Waldman  
(New York: Random House, 2008)

Waldman tries to pin down the religious faith of the founding fathers exactly. Modern liberals claim them as humanists and deists, while religious conservatives insist the founders of the republic were believing Christians. Waldman examines the spiritual life of five men in depth, Franklin, John Adams, Washington, Jefferson, and Madison. I miss Tom Paine, but perhaps he wasn't among the major founders. The first two of the five were raised in the puritan, congregational church, the last three had conventional upbringings in the Church of England. These churches were established and obligatory in Massachusetts and Virginia respectively. They were supported by the taxes everyone had to pay, whether they adhered to the specific doctrine of the church or not.

Waldman uses his narrative to describe how the founding fathers constructed the Constitution in general and specifically how we came by the First Amendment which gives us freedom of religion and the Wall between Church and State. Along the way the author tramples on some common myths promoted by the culture warriors. The founders were neither unbelievers, nor faithful Christians in the modern sense. We need to remember that they lived after Copernicus and Newton had shown that the universe ran without the need of a constantly interfering god. They also lived before Hutton and Lyell established the evolution of the earth over deep time, and before Darwin taught us that humans were not modeled out of clay.

Franklin left the Boston of his puritan upbringing early in life, and never returned to a church. He rather tasted of many religions, but wrote his own Lord's prayer. The mixture of doctrines and faiths in Philadelphia taught him that tolerance was the only way in which people of different churches could live in harmony. John Adams never lost his Christian faith, but came to detest the preachers of the established church in Massachusetts, who would force their doctrines on all citizens. He lost

his faith in the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus, thus wandering to the Unitarians.

Waldman gives enormous credit for our religious freedom to Washington, whose personal faith is difficult to describe exactly, though he clearly believed in a personal god who would support this new country in its just endeavors. Washington created the first national institution, the army. He insisted on the need for prayer and preaching, but tolerated all faiths, even the Catholics who were prohibited in several states, and could hold office in none. Waldman emphasizes Washington's enormous acceptance and tolerance for all denominations, he actively created religious freedom in practice.

Jefferson and Madison were truly believers. When Jefferson wrote of the creator and divine providence in the Declaration of Independence he was serious. Neither of them, however, cared for the clergy or the established church or its doctrines. Jefferson admired Jesus for his ethical teaching, and extracted his own bible from the New Testament by eliminating all mysticism and miracles. Madison admired many religions. He clearly saw that only strict neutrality toward all religions and hands off the churches would allow the many denominations to live under one government. He was the major "father" of the first amendment to the Constitution, which prohibited the Federal Government from establishing, or even aiding any denomination. This prohibition applied only to the Federal Government until the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment was passed after the Civil War.

So was the United States founded as a "Christian" nation as the fundamentalists would have it. No, the country started as an overwhelmingly "protestant" nation of many different sects, which for the most part hated and persecuted each other. For all the authority of the new government, the states persisted in keeping their established churches. The last State supported religion was not abolished until 1833. Jews, Catholics and various sects were discriminated against, hampered in their permission to build churches or ability to worship freely. It was a combination of elite enlightenment aristocrats and dissenting evangelicals who resented paying taxes for established churches, who promoted the First Amendment.

This is a very readable book, we learn reality and facts about our history.

– Wolf Roder



March 2009 Potluck  
Tuesday March 10, 2009



February Meeting  
Sunday Mar. 22 2009, 7:00 PM



**FIG Leaves**  
P.O. Box 53174  
Cincinnati, OH 45253

# FIG

## Our Purpose

The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. (FIG) is a non-profit organization founded in 1991. FIG is allied with the Council for Secular Humanism as well as an affiliate of the American Humanist Association and of the American Atheists.

Though most of our members are secular humanists, we welcome to our meetings anyone interested in learning about or furthering our purpose.



*To foster a community of secular humanists dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry and creative thinking unfettered by superstition, religion, or any form of dogma.*

In accordance with our purpose, we have established the following goals:

- To provide a forum for intelligent exchange of ideas for those seeking fulfillment in an ethical secular life.
- To develop through open discussion the moral basis of a secular society and encourage ethical practices within our own membership and the community at large.
- To inform the public regarding secular alternatives to supernatural interpretations of the human condition.
- To support and defend the principles of democracy, free speech, and separation of church and state as expressed in the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights.

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail fignotes at (@) gofigger.org, or visit our web site at gofigger.org or freeinquirygroup.org.